

AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT: A COLORADO CASE STUDY

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Agencies concerned for the safety of probation and parole officers who must supervise dangerous offenders in areas that pose significant risks have designed various responses to prepare for or avoid critical incidents. These responses range from training staff in self-defense techniques and in how to de-escalate confrontations to providing safety equipment or firearms. Such steps are absolutely necessary. A recent incident involving the Colorado Division of Adult Parole Supervision highlights the importance of accompanying them with plans to handle the aftermath of a critical incident if one should occur in spite of the agency's best prevention efforts. A review of the Colorado agency's response may assist other probation and parole managers in developing such plans.

On July 19, 1996, two parole officers (one male, one female) were making a routine home inspection at 9:30 p.m. in southwest Denver. Officers of the agency are armed, and agency policy requires two officers when home inspections are made in the evening. The parolee being contacted had previously been on the unit supervisor's caseload, so the supervisor was also on the scene to monitor the inspection and to transfer case supervision to one of the parole officers.

The parolee was not home when the officers arrived, but the parolee's sister permitted the officers to check the premises. The officers found a pistol in the parolee's closet, and, as they were removing the weapon, the parolee arrived home and met the officers in front of the house. When informed that he would be taken into custody, the parolee ran behind the house with the officers in pursuit. After a short chase, the parolee stopped, pulled a weapon, and aimed it at the officers. One of the officers fired twice, fatally wounding the parolee.

The agency director was called to the scene immediately. The director was a past Denver police chief, and his experience in law enforcement helped the agency deal effectively with the aftermath of the shooting, the first such incident in agency history. A number of local police were in the neighborhood on an unrelated matter, and they also quickly responded to the scene.

Several agencies and individuals were then brought into the picture:

- The police contacted the local prosecutor's office to assist with the onsite investigation
- The parole director contacted an attorney with experience representing police officers in similar situations to represent the parole officer. Questioning of the parole officer and statements to police were delayed until the legal counsel was present.
- The parole director notified the State Attorney General's office, which is responsible for representing the interests of any state agency.

- The parole director contacted a psychologist who had previously consulted with the parole agency and local law enforcement regarding traumatic incidents. The psychologist came immediately to the scene to offer support to the officers and, throughout the investigation, provided support to the officers and their families.
- As the parolee had gang affiliations, the local parole regional manager coordinated with local police gang units to monitor gang activity and reduce the risk of gang retaliation. The police and parole officers contacted suspected gang members, conducted weapons searches, and increased gang surveillance.

Agency administrators also conducted a Critical Incident Review to determine if agency procedures had been followed and to identify any implications for revising policy or training. The review resulted in plans to increase training for crime scene preservation. It also prompted officials to consider developing a card for officers to carry that would provide staff and agency information-including references to statutory authority for carrying weapons-on one side, and on the other a quick reference of steps for officers to take following a critical incident.

Elements of Critical Incident Response

Although incident response is routine for law enforcement agencies, it is not routine for probation and parole agencies. These agencies' increased focus on preventing or dealing with critical incidents should be accompanied by an increased emphasis on preparing for reacting appropriately in their aftermath.

On-site response. Agency policies, procedures, and training must address immediate steps for staff to take after an incident. These should include notification of local law enforcement and other emergency teams, contacts with agency management, preservation of evidence, and identification of witnesses.

Protection of legal interests. Critical incidents raise the potential for criminal and civil litigation against the agency and staff. Agencies should make provisions for immediate notification of the agency's legal representatives and of separate counsel to protect a staff person's legal interests. (The legal interests of the agency and staff may not always be the same.)

Staff and witness support. Plans should be in place to provide staff with immediate personal counseling, along with long-term monitoring and support for them and their families to help them adjust to the stress of critical incidents.

Staff and witness protection. In cooperation with local law enforcement, the agency should review the family and associates of offenders to determine the presence of any risk to staff or witnesses of critical incidents. Local victim/witness programs may also provide resources to deal with this potential problem.

Incident review. Following any critical incident, agency managers should debrief those involved, analyze the level of compliance with agency policies and procedures, and determine the need for modifying any existing directives or staff training.

For further information, Thomas E. Coogan, Director, Colorado Division of Adult Parole Supervision; telephone (303) 239-5435. *-Thanks to Thomas E. Coogan, Director, and Ernie Fernandez, Supervisor, Division of Parole Supervision, Colorado Department of Corrections, for information for this article. ■*